

# The History of Nationalism in Japan : particularly on the formative period

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## I

According to Ernest Gellner [2008\*], ‘Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’. ‘Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment’. In the case of Japan, a trigger for this nationalist sentiment was the arrival of the U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry’s fleet to Japan in 1853.

During the Tokugawa period, Japan had had relations with only a few countries (China, Korea, Holland, Ryu-kyu [now, Okinawa prefecture] and Ezo [now, Hokkaido]). Therefore the arrival of Perry’s fleet was practically the first contact with another country for almost 260 years. Moreover, Commodore Perry compelled Japan to open up the country and establish relations with the U.S. This situation angered some Japanese soldiers (samurai, bu-shi), which triggered nationalist sentiment among them.

However, they were only a small proportion of the Japanese population.

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\* Gellner, E. [2008] *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd. edn, New York : Cornell UUniversity press.

As Gellner pointed out, pre-modern societies in general were segmented societies. As for Japan, Japanese society during the Tokugawa period was segmented both vertically and horizontally, that is to say, by the class system and the feudal domain system.

The class system divided the Japanese people into four main classes, which were soldiers, farmers, artisans and merchants (SHI-NOU-KOU-SHOU in Japanese), and there were discriminated groups below them. In particular, a definite boundary line had been drawn between soldiers and others. Soldiers were both soldiers and rulers. The others were people who were ruled over. People who outraged the perry's fleet were some of soldiers mainly.

Horizontally, Japan was divided into about 270 feudal domains in the Tokugawa era. Each domain was autonomous. Each domain's lord had their own armed force, and collected taxes from their subjects, and ran their domains by themselves. In those days, many soldiers were more loyal to their domains than to their country. In such a society, people tended to lack the sense of belonging to a country, so modern Japan had to resolve these segmentations and unite as a nation.

## II

The first attempt to eliminate the class system and feudal domain system by the Meiji government was "Hansenki-hokan", which was the return of lands and people to the emperor in 1869. The forerunner of this idea was Munenori Terashima, a samurai from Satsuma. He handed in a proposal to his superior, the feudal lord of Satsuma in 1867. His idea was to return the land and people to the emperor and to establish the rule by the emperor.

Terashima travelled to Europe twice during the late Tokugawa period, and

by observing western countries he realized that in order to continue being independent, Japan had to become a united country fashioned after Western countries instead of a feudal one.

Two years later, four influential feudal lords (Satsuma, Tyosyu, Tosa and Hizen) submitted the plan for Hanseki-hokan. In that plan, they said that the place we lived in was the land of the emperor and the people whom we governed were his subjects. We must not own them privately, so we must return them to the emperor. Then, other lords followed.

The above-mentioned process shows the following. First, it was Terashima who had experienced life abroad that advocated the abolishment of the feudal domain system. Second, Terashima was keen to unite the country in the fashion of Western countries in order to keep Japan independent. Third, the rationale to unify the country and people made use of Japanese history, what they thought of as the original Japanese state of the country and people, that is to say the emperor's land and emperor's people. Thus, the Japanese country and its people became one-state and one-people.

However, that was only a nominal abolishment of the class system and feudal domain system. In spite of this reformation, lords were still in their domains and ruled their people.

### III

The next task of the Meiji government was to make a census registration in order to institutionalize the nominal one-people concept.

Here I will point out two people who were influential to the process of making registration. One is Eiichi Shibusawa. Shibusawa was a former farmer and he had been humiliated by an officer (who was also a soldier, samurai) in the Tokugawa period. Shibusawa had been to France in the late

Tokugawa period, and he was impressed by the fact that a banker was equal with a government official in France.

When he came back home, he was invited to the Ministry of Finance because of his knowledge about western society. As an officer of the Ministry of Finance, he engaged in making a census registration. He intended to make a registration which included all people equally, not to be categorized by class. But his plan faced resistance from various groups.

Then, Yuzuru Sugiura took over Shibusawa's work. Sugiura had been to France with Shibusawa. After coming back, he entered the Ministry of Finance as well, and later he picked up Shibusawa's plan which still had not been implemented. His argument for making a bill of census registration was interesting for showing the integration of western political thought and Japanese history.

The argument was as follows. 'The government owes its legitimacy to the cooperation of the people, so the government has an obligation to make people happy. Ancient Japan was a country where people cooperated with each other. And in ancient Japan, there was a census registration, in which all people were registered equally. Likewise we will make a census registration now'. He had friends who were Japanese scholars majoring in western ideas. So he explained about government on the basis of his understanding of the theory of the social contract. He also tried to combine it with the ancient Japanese registration system.

In the end, their plan was not realized as they intended. The registration, as actually completed, categorized people into noble class, soldier, lower rank soldier and commoner. In the face of resistance from various groups, the dividing line between the former ruler and the ruled remained. However, we can confirm that as for the former ruled over, they came to belong to one

class as commoners. And here again the forerunners were persons who had experience abroad, and they were keen to treat people equally. They also used the rationale of ancient Japanese history which they thought of as the original state of Japan.

#### IV

The Meiji government had to eliminate the class system and feudal domain system substantially because of the imperfection of past measures. In 1871, the Meiji government implemented the Haihan-chiken, which abolished the feudal domain system and introduced the prefectural system. The Meiji government expected strong resistance, but there was much less resistance than anticipated.

As William Elliot Griffis, who was in Japan at that time to teach Chemistry, described in his diary, the reason for the acceptance of the Haihan-chiken was that many Japanese (although not all) might have felt the need to make a united nation. However, what happened after that was somewhat complicated.

Indeed, the feudal domain system was abolished, and it was done relatively easily. However, the abolishment of the class system didn't go so easily. There was harsh resistance from various groups of former soldiers, and the government had to suppress them by force. In other words, the horizontal segmentation of pre-modern Japan was eliminated relatively easily, but the vertical one was not so readily.

#### V

On the other hand, the Meiji government planned to change the people's mindset. In the Tokugawa period, the people who had been governed were

indifferent to affairs of the country. The Meiji government planned to change those people's mindset so that they were concerned with and supportive of the country.

In 1872 the Meiji government issued the Imperial Rescript about conscription, and enforced the conscription order the following year. As you know, conscription systems are known to be useful for formation of nations in western countries. Japan introduced a system similar to the European ones. Again here, the Meiji government made use of Japanese history. The emperor's rescript said that, in ancient Japan, soldiers consisted of the common people from the whole country, and they protected it. There was no distinction among classes. The Rescript said: 'Today is different from the feudal era. The soldier class is abolished. All people are the emperor's people. All people should devote themselves to the country mentally and physically'.

In 1890 the Meiji government issued the Imperial Rescript on Education. In that rescript, children were taught virtues to be observed, and inspired to devote themselves to the emperor in time of national crisis.

By the way, after a the Haihan-chiken, Toshimichi Okubo, who was the most important leader in the Meiji government, had a chance to go abroad as a member of a delegation.

Before going abroad, he had seen the people as ignorant and unenlightened, and he thought that the role of government was to protect them. This was the typical view of feudal rulers.

After his trip to western countries, he handed in 'the paper on the constitutional polity' to the government. In that paper, he compared Japan with the UK. Both were almost the same in size, and had almost the same population. The UK dominated the world, but Japan didn't. Why? Because in the UK the people were concerned about the independence of one's country

in order to protect their own rights, whereas in Japan the people concerning about the country were very few, so we needed to have a nation that took charge of affairs of the country, and created the polity which developed the people's rights. But, although he realized the necessity of having such a nation, he still saw the people as ignorant even after that. He thought that the real people were immature and it was necessary for the government to instruct them.

Just at that time, the anti-government movement had begun. The movement criticized the dictatorial power of Okubo, and demanded for the establishment of a democratic diet. They called for the people's rights. However, it was solely the right to participate in politics. Apart from the few exceptions, they hardly considered the right of civil liberties. They thought lightly of the basic human rights called civil liberties which restrained the power of the state and protected civic life from violation by the state power. They insisted that the establishment of a democratic diet would strengthen the country by getting people's cooperation. They said that the reason for demanding the strengthening of the people's right was in the hope of strengthening the power of state.

Interestingly, both Okubo and the anti-Okubo movement advocated almost the same in one respect. Both called for a nation that was helpful in strengthening the country. The anti-government movement's request had been realized as the establishment of the diet in 1890.

## VI

Finally, I'd like to offer you a few implications for the next development from the aforementioned, although of course various factors might affect the next development.

First, the formation of the nation in Japan had the two-facedness. It was fashioned after western countries, but at the same time it had been shaped by Japanese history, what was thought of as the original state of Japan.

Second, the nation had been defined as the emperor's people from the beginning of its formation in Japan.

Third, both the government and the anti-government movement considered the nation as an entity that served to strengthen the country.

When the times of the crisis in the 1930s came, Japanese nationalism pushed the myth of the original state of Japan forward and required the nation to devote themselves to the country as the emperor's people. A nation that thought so little of civil liberties was unable to resist the state's demands.

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